

## LESSON 7: UNDERSTANDING AND CONTROLLING STRESS



*anxiety*  
*depression*  
*dilated*  
*fight or flight response*  
*generalized*  
*manic-depressive illness*  
*meditation*  
*migraines*  
*visualization*

### INTRODUCTION

While stress in small doses is a normal, healthy part of life, stress that continues over long periods of time can lead to exhaustion and possible mental or physical illness. This section discusses what causes stress, how it can affect you, and ways that you can manage it. Handling stress in your life and recognizing symptoms of stress in others will make your life more enjoyable and your leadership more effective.

The media often portrays the teen years as a carefree time, with few major responsibilities and lots of new and exciting experiences. Many young people know, however, that this is only one side of the coin. You may not have the responsibilities of your parents, but your responsibilities are growing as you grow. New challenges and experiences, while exciting, can also be a bit scary. Expectations for the future can be exhilarating, but they can also result in anxiety and pressure to succeed. As teenagers make their way to adulthood, they experience a range of emotions and changes that can make their high school years very stressful.

### WHAT IS STRESS?

Stress is the way your body reacts and adjusts to the psychological and physical demands of life. It can be brought on by situations that cause feelings such as fear, irritation, endangerment, excitement, and expectation. Stress in small amounts is beneficial and needed for motivation, improvement, and growth. It can give you a burst of energy to complete a project or run a race, the control and strength to get through a difficult time, or the inspiration to write a poem or paint a picture. Stress can be an important factor in your achievements and progress.

Yet, times of stress should be followed by times of relaxation to ensure recovery from stress. Experiencing constant stress without a break has a negative effect on people. While stress followed by a period of rest can actually make a person better prepared for the next stressful event, stress followed by more stress without recovery in between can exhaust a person making him or her less prepared to handle the next stressful event. Eventually, constant stress can affect a person psychologically and physically, disrupting normal behavior and resulting in illness.

### PHYSICAL EFFECTS OF STRESS

When your mind perceives a situation as stressful, it triggers a series of physical and chemical reactions in your body. These include increased blood flow to the muscles and brain, decreased blood flow to the skin and digestive organs, shut down of the immune system, and the release of fuel, like fat, into the bloodstream. While these internal reactions to stress will not be obvious to you, noticeable results of these reactions include increased heart and breathing rates, muscle tension, **dilated** pupils, cold hands, and dry mouth.

These reactions happen as part of a **fight or flight response** developed in primitive humans to deal with physical threats by either fighting or fleeing. Either way, primitive man's mind and body placed emphasis on physically responding to stressful situations by providing extra fuel and blood to the muscles while slowing or shutting down other functions.



For modern man, most stressful situations are not life threatening and do not require a physical response, yet being stuck in a traffic jam or pushing hard to finish a report still causes the same physical reactions as those needed for fight or flight. Luckily, once modern man deals with the stress, finishes the stressful activity, or the source of stress goes away, the body and all of its functions return to normal.

On the other hand, if the source of stress continues, the person does not deal with the stress effectively, or the person faces stressful situation after stressful situation, his or her body will not recover its normal state. Eventually, the body's continual reaction to prolonged stress may result in the following physical problems:

- Insomnia
- Grinding or clenching of teeth, especially when sleeping

- Diarrhea
- Indigestion
- Ulcers
- Nausea
- Backaches
- Headaches
- **Migraines**
- Uncontrollable tics or twitches
- Stuttering
- Allergies
- Asthma
- High blood pressure
- Heart disease

Of particular note is the connection between continual stress and heart disease. Since most of modern man's stressful situations do not require physical action, the fat pumped into the bloodstream to act as fuel for the muscles is left unused, collecting on artery walls and contributing to heart disease.

### *PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF STRESS*

Generally, the first indications a person may have of stress overload are certain feelings, like irritability or worrying. If the person pays attention to these feelings and takes action to reduce stress, the effects of stress will not continue. If, however, the person ignores these initial warning signs and seeks no relief from stress, he or she will experience more psychological effects and probably begin to experience some of the physical effects discussed previously.

Psychologically, continual stress may cause:

- Irritability
- Excessive worrying
- **Anxiety**
- Inability to relax
- Forgetfulness

- Disorganization
- Inability to concentrate
- Inability to complete tasks
- Lack of energy
- Trouble with relationships
- Changed eating habits; over- or under-eating with corresponding weight gain or loss
- Use or increased use of alcohol and other drugs
- Lowered self-esteem
- Feelings of discouragement
- Excessive feelings of guilt or self-blame
- Emotional overreaction, like exploding or crying without reason
- Waking from sleep with a sense of doom
- Disinterest in the world and life
- Dissatisfaction with things that were previously satisfying
- Tendency to avoid people and activities, even those that were previously enjoyed
- Unexplained feelings of helplessness or hopelessness
- Depression



When stress continues to go unchecked, negative feelings, like depression and hopelessness, can intensify over time. In severe cases, people can become depressed enough to try to commit suicide. It is important, therefore, to listen to your feelings, relate them to what is happening in your life,

and respond to them promptly before the effects of stress get out of hand.

## WHAT CAN CAUSE STRESS?

Causes of stress and levels of stress experienced under certain circumstances vary from person to person depending on their personalities and tolerance for different situations and experiences. For example, an outgoing person may find public speaking easy and enjoyable, while a shy person may find it difficult and frightening. On the other hand, the shy person may be quite content to study alone, while the outgoing person may find studying alone nerve-wracking. Neither of these people is better or worse than the other — they are simply two different people reacting differently to the same situations. So, do not compare yourself with others when it comes to stress. What is important is that you understand what causes you stress and learn to manage it before the stress “mismanages” you.

Read through the following items that are common causes of stress for many young people. Think about which ones are stressful for you and whether or not they are things that you can control. Recognizing what causes your stress is a step toward managing it.

### *PERSONAL HABITS*

- Poor time management
- Poor diet
- Irregular sleep habits
- Lack of exercise

### *SOCIAL*

- Conflicts with family or friends
- Peer pressure to use alcohol, tobacco, or drugs
- Peer pressure to engage in a sexual relationship

- Pressure to be popular
- Lack of money

### *MAJOR LIFE CHANGES*

- Death in the family
- Severe illness in the family
- Parents divorce
- Parent remarries
- Moving
- Changing schools

### *ENVIRONMENTAL*

- Air and noise pollution
- Feeling confined
- Overcrowding
- Poor lighting
- Uncomfortable temperature
- Feeling unsafe in your neighborhood, home, or school

### *RESPONSIBILITIES*

- Participating in too many activities
- Having unrealistic expectations of yourself
- Constant deadlines
- Concern about grades
- Concern about college and career decisions
- Having to work and go to school
- Having to care for younger brothers or sisters

### **STRESS STRATEGIES**

There is no way to eliminate stress completely from life. In fact, as previously explained, a stress-free life would not even be desirable, since stress in reasonable amounts aids performance, creativity, and problem solving. Letting stress get out of hand, however, is a common problem in today's hectic world. Fortunately, once you recognize signs

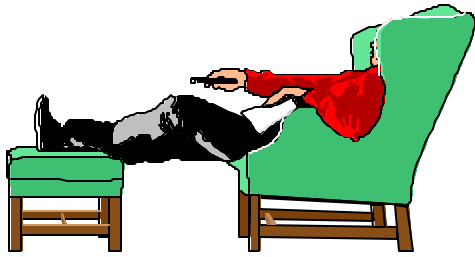
of stress overload in yourself and identify its cause, you can either eliminate the source of stress or, if it is not possible to eliminate it, learn to manage the stress associated with it.

### *PREVENTING STRESS OVERLOAD*

The best way to ensure stress does not get the best of you is to follow life-long habits that promote mental and physical well-being. Getting plenty of sleep, eating well-balanced meals, and exercising regularly will help you cope better with stressful situations, while maintaining a positive outlook will help you face difficulties with more confidence. In addition to these commonsense approaches, the following can also promote well-being and prevent stress overload.

- Manage your time with daily, weekly, and/or monthly schedules. In addition to scheduling time for school, study, extra-curricular activities, etc., make sure you allow enough time for sleep, unhurried meals, relaxation, and other things you enjoy.
- Take care of your problems as soon as possible; avoiding them will not make them go away. The longer you put off dealing with a problem, the more anxious you will feel about it, and the more stress you will create for yourself.
- Keep a journal of the situations you find stressful — for each situation, explain why you find it stressful, how you handled it, and whether or not you believe you could handle it better in the future.
- Develop a hobby and/or participate regularly in an activity you enjoy.
- Take some time every day to do something you find relaxing — whether it is sitting quietly alone and thinking, talking

with a good friend on the phone, or laughing at your favorite sitcom.



- Talk over problems with people you trust and who you know are good listeners. Keeping all your thoughts and feelings to yourself can be very stressful. While you may believe you can handle all your problems on your own, everyone needs at least one person to confide in.
- Accept that throughout life you will encounter stressful situations that you cannot or should not avoid, but recognize that you have control over how you approach and respond to those situations. For example, while Shelley dreads going to the dentist, she realizes it is important, and instead of dwelling on how much she hates it, focuses on the benefits of dental care to her overall health and on how good her teeth will look and feel after the dental appointment. Approaching stressful situations positively and looking to the ultimate outcome of the situation can lower the amount of stress you experience.
- When you do have a choice, do not participate in activities you find stressful and unrewarding. Often times, young people will take part in activities because their friends do, they believe their parents want them to, or they just believe they must do it all. Only you know which activities are enjoyable and worthwhile to you, which bring you negative stress, and how many things you can do before getting overloaded. Be honest with yourself and with those who care about you in

making decisions about participating in certain activities. If taking aerobics with your friends makes you feel more uptight than healthy and relaxed, and you would really rather get your exercise going for a walk alone, let your friends know how you feel, then do what is best for you.

- Be prepared when you know you will have to face a stressful situation. For example, if you know that you must give a class presentation, plan for it and rehearse it until you feel comfortable with it. By preparing for it, you will be more calm during the time leading up to the presentation and will feel more confident when giving it.
- Do not use tobacco, alcohol, or other drugs. Using drugs does not solve any problems and, more often than not, causes new ones.
- Do not be overly self-critical; remember that making mistakes is part of the growing process and that learning from them will make you more successful in the future.
- If you can, limit the number of changes you make in your life at any one time. For example, if in the same week that you start a new job after school, you also start getting up earlier each morning to jog before school, you are probably putting too much pressure on yourself. To limit your stress level, get used to the new routine of having an after-school job before you add anything else to your schedule.
- Learn a relaxation technique like **meditation**, **visualization**, or deep breathing.

## RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

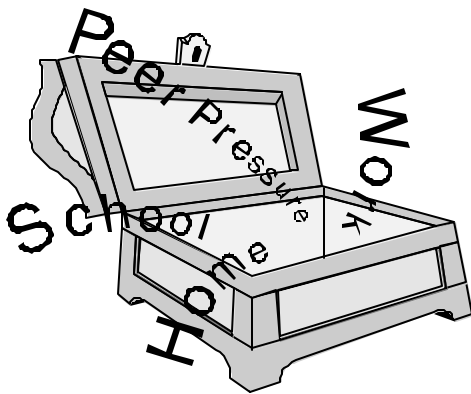
Try using these relaxation techniques when you notice the warning signs of stress.

### Deep Breathing

1. While closing your eyes, take a deep breath in through your nose so that your abdomen expands.
2. Slowly exhale through your mouth, letting all the air out of your lungs and allowing your stomach to contract.
3. Repeat for 5 to 10 minutes.

### The Worry Box

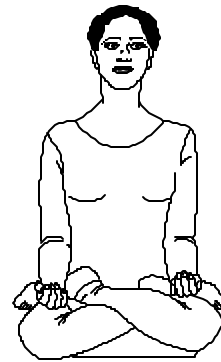
1. Start deep breathing.
2. Visualize a box that has a lock and key.
3. Imagine yourself putting all your worries and fears in the box, then closing the lid and locking it with the key.



4. Imagine yourself putting the key somewhere out of sight — like under a mattress or on the top shelf of a closet — and, therefore, out of mind.

## Meditation

1. Find a quiet place where you can be alone for at least 10 minutes.
2. Sit on the floor with your legs crossed. Some people put one or both of their feet up onto their inner thighs when meditating. Keep your back and neck straight. Relax your arms with your hands in your lap or on your knees — palms up or down, whichever feels most comfortable to you.



3. Close your eyes and try to empty your mind. Many people do this by concentrating on their breathing or on a single word, image, or sound.

### Quick Calming Response

1. Turn inward and “listen” to a sound or word that you find relaxing and choose to use when stress overload hits.
2. As you repeat the sound or word inside yourself, slowly take deep breaths in and out, visualizing the release of the “tense air” from your body with each exhaled breath.

*Progressive Relaxation*

1. Sit or lie down in a comfortable position and begin deep breathing.
2. As you inhale, tighten the muscles in your head and neck area.
3. Relax the tensed muscles as you slowly exhale.
4. Continue with all parts of your body, working your way from head to foot.

*LETTING OFF STEAM*

Sometimes, stressful situations can make you feel frustrated and angry. To keep the stress from getting the better of you and possibly “losing your cool,” try the following:

- Take several deep breaths, releasing tension with each exhale.
- Close your eyes and visualize yourself in a calming situation or place.
- Take a break, if possible; remove yourself from the problem or situation until you feel more relaxed and under control.
- Analyze the importance of the situation. Does it really matter if someone cuts you off in traffic or bumps into you and does not excuse him or herself? Is it worth feeling angry about or wasting your time and energy on? Is it better just to forget it and move on?
- If something is important to you and you can take action, confront the person or situation calmly. If it is not possible to confront the person or problem directly, let off steam, depending upon the situation, by either talking to someone you trust or writing an angry letter, then throwing it away.

- Work off tension with a physical activity, like screaming into a pillow, taking a walk, or lifting weights.

**STRESS AND LEADERSHIP**

As a leader, learn to manage your own stress effectively, so that you do not create a negative environment for your followers. Recognize that your behavior can directly affect the stress level of your group of cadets. Stress in groups can be increased to counter-productive and unhealthy levels when leaders:

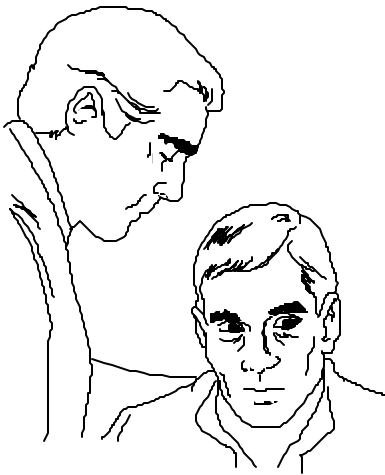
- Act unpredictably.
- Constantly find fault with their followers, which eats away at their followers’ self-esteem and results in increased anxiety.
- Set up win/lose situations in which either they are right and their followers are wrong or vice versa
- Demand too much or too little of their followers.

Leaders can keep a group’s stress to healthy levels by:

- Allowing some participation in the decision-making process, which creates a feeling of trust and usefulness in followers, and promotes team spirit and cooperation within the group.
- Giving credit where it is due and praise when warranted.
- Offering constructive criticism when necessary.
- Having a good working knowledge of the tasks the group needs to perform.

- Monitoring and tracking tasks as they are performed and offering guidance when necessary.

As a leader, you must also be aware of any indications that cadets are feeling or acting “stressed out.” If you realize someone is showing signs of stress, let them know that you have noticed they have not been themselves lately, or ask if everything is okay with them. Your concern will probably encourage them to talk to you about how they are feeling, and just the fact that they are talking about it and you are listening can help to relieve their stress.



## DEPRESSION

People often say, “Oh, I’m so depressed,” when they are having a bad day or because some unhappy event has recently occurred. Sadness and grief are normal reactions to certain events in life. A person who is having a passing blue mood is not truly depressed. For minor low moods, stimulating or enjoyable activities, like running or reading a good book, are often all that is needed to raise a person’s spirits.

Major depression, on the other hand, is a serious illness that requires treatment. It affects the whole body and involves thoughts, feelings, bodily functions, and behaviors.

Most people usually recover from bad events in life after a reasonable amount of time; depressed people do not. And while some cases of depression can be traced to a specific stressful experience, other cases of depression seem to have no apparent reason for occurring.

An episode of depression can occur once in a person’s life or many times. A depressed person’s symptoms may last for months, years, or a lifetime. Depression can be so severe that the person cannot function at all. Some people who are chronically depressed are able to function, but never feel really well, content, or happy. They may be unaware that they are even depressed, because they are so used to feeling that way.

Depending upon the individual and the severity of the illness, a depressed person will experience a variety of these symptoms to different degrees. Note that many of these symptoms are similar to symptoms of stress.

- Constantly feeling sad or “empty”
- Feeling hopeless, worthless, and helpless
- Unable to make decisions, remember things, or concentrate
- Loss of interest in normally pleasurable activities
- Irritability
- Disinterest in school, at home, and in other activities
- Not caring about appearance
- Avoiding people; staying alone most of the time
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, and making decisions
- Problems falling asleep and then problems getting up
- Loss of appetite
- Feeling tired and “slowed down” all the time



- Chronic aches and pains and digestive problems
- Frequent thoughts of death and/or suicide
- Suicide attempts

It is important to remember that depression is a real illness and not caused by personal weakness. Potential for developing some kinds of depression may be inherited, and therefore, biologically related. For instance, **manic-depressive illness** seems to occur in people whose genetic makeup is different than those who do not become ill; however, not everyone who has the genetic makeup for the illness gets it. This suggests that other factors, such as stress, also play a role in the development of the disease.

As with stress, physically active people who eat well and get plenty of sleep tend to feel less depressed than people with less healthy lifestyles. Therefore, if you are feeling mildly depressed, take a look at your current eating, sleeping, and exercise habits, and try to make some changes there. In addition, do things you enjoy, try something different that you have always wanted to do, talk to friends, spend time outside since the color green and the sun are known to boost spirits, and try not to pressure or push yourself for awhile.

Likewise, if you know someone who is exhibiting signs of depression, take the time to listen to how they are feeling and offer them your support. Give them the suggestions listed above for lifting their spirits and breaking out of negative habits. Be patient. Often, depressed people are not fun to be around and may even try to push you away, but they really need a friend to understand and encourage them to try to make some changes.

If after giving these suggestions a try, you think his or her depression is worsening

or becoming long-term, encourage your friend to seek help. Likewise, if you yourself are depressed and believe it is worsening and continuing, seek help. Doctors, psychologists, counselors, mental health clinics, hospitals, family services, social agencies, and private clinics are among the many people and places that offer help for all types of emotional disorders, including depression.

## ANXIETY

Anxiety is a feeling that everyone experiences occasionally when dealing with things they fear or worry about. Unlike depression, which makes people feel tired and unenergetic, anxiety makes people feel nervous and energetic, almost as if they cannot sit still. Like stress, anxiety in small amounts and for short duration can be beneficial. It can give you a spurt of energy and sharpen your mind. Too much anxiety, however, can be harmful and lessen your ability to perform. For example, while a little anxiety before giving a speech can heighten your powers of recall, projection, and expression, too much anxiety can make you freeze, forgetting information and stammering through the presentation.

To keep anxiety from getting the best of you, admit to yourself those things you fear and/or worry about. Then, when you know you will have to deal with one of them, make sure you are thoroughly prepared for it — practice for the speech, study for the test, rehearse the dance routine, workout faithfully before the big meet, etc. Being unprepared will only fuel your anxiety. When you start to worry or feel afraid, remind yourself that it is a waste of your energy, then visualize yourself doing well instead. Prior to the event or situation, focus on its positive outcomes, use the relaxation techniques discussed previously, and avoid caffeine, which only increases anxiety.

While it is normal to be mildly anxious about something that frightens or worries us, feeling anxious without a specific reason can indicate an anxiety disorder. When a person experiences anxiety over a long period of time that is related to so many worries and fears the anxiety has become **generalized**, the person is suffering from free-floating anxiety. Often, the effects of free-floating anxiety are the same as stress overload.



When a person experiences anxiety attacks, which are strong, sudden attacks of anxiety for no apparent reason that last only a few minutes, he or she feels panic and extreme stress accompanied by dizziness, faintness, rapid heartbeat, excessive perspiration, and nausea. A person having an anxiety attack is not able to function until the attack passes. Some people have severe anxiety attacks so frequently that they are constantly fearful and unable to cope with many things in life. People suffering from

excessive anxiety, whether free floating or anxiety attacks, should seek help from a counselor who can help them reduce or learn to deal with their anxiety.

## CONCLUSION

Humans experience a wide range of emotions and not all of them are pleasant. Yet, even certain uncomfortable emotions like stress and anxiety are beneficial in small doses. Sometimes, though, because of hectic, hurried schedules and pressures to do too many things or things we do not necessarily enjoy, stress can get out of hand. When you start feeling and showing warning signs of stress overload, step back and take a look at what is going on in your life. Ask yourself what is causing your symptoms of stress, then take care of it or reduce the stress you associate with it.

Meanwhile, to be prepared for the stressful events that will surely pop up throughout your life, maintain a healthy lifestyle so that you are better able to handle whatever life throws your way. Keep negative stress and anxiety at bay by doing things you enjoy, learning ways to relax, and thinking positively.

Remember, if these uncomfortable emotions ever become extreme or last for long periods of time, *seek help*. They can be disruptive to your mental and physical well-being and can even be initial indications of mental illness and physical disease.